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THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL IN 1800.

By GLENN BROWN.

(Read before the Society April 2, 1900.)

About two months ago Mr. W. B. Bryan asked me if I could inform him in which rooms of the Capitol the Houses of Congress held their first session in this city. Having prepared a history of the Capitol Building, I was supposed to know. While my notes gave a fairly clear chain showing the evolution of the design and construction of the building they gave nothing definite as to location of the rooms in which the Houses of Congress first held their meetings.

It seems hardly necessary to state that the portion of the Capitol erected in 1800 was designed by Dr. Wm. Thornton. The competition instituted July 15, 1792, produced no plan which was satisfactory to the commissioners, so a second opportunity was given to those wishing to compete and Hallet and Thornton were apparently the only competitors. The plan of Thornton immediately captivated President Washington, Secretary of State Jefferson and the commissioners of the District, because of the convenient arrangement of its rooms and the grandeur of its design. The work was awarded to Thornton April 5, 1793. His competitive plan was modified in scale so as to reduce the cost and Hallet, who was appointed superintendent, because Thornton would not engage to devote his entire time to this work, attempted to introduce radical changes in both the design and plan, and for this reason was discharged by Washington, and Thornton was again put in charge of the building as one of the commissioners of the District, when he made new drawings throwing out

the modifications of Hallet so, as to make the building conform to the original design. Thus the portion of the Capitol finished in 1800, as it was when first occupied by Congress was designed and erected under Thornton's supervision.

The data from which I have been able to locate the Houses of Congress consists of three plans of the building made by Dr. William Thornton, plans by Latrobe before and after the destruction of the building by the British, the reports of the commissioners of the District of Columbia, notes from papers and letters by Thornton, Hallet, Hadfield, Latrobe, Lenthall, Washington and Jefferson.

The condition and appearance of the building, together with the accommodations which it offered, are matters of interest at this time, one hundred years from the date of its first occupancy.

The north or Senate wing, now occupied by the Supreme Court, was finished and ready for its Congressional tenants in December, 1800. The minor partitions, floors and roof were of wooden construction. It had a basement, first and second story.

Portions of the foundations of the central building, or the rotunda were in place. The basement, or first story, of the House wing, now the Sculpture Hall, was in process of construction, being a few feet above the ground.

Judging from the relative height of windows, as shown on the exterior, and allowing for the thickness of floors, the basement must have been about 18 feet high, the first story from 20 to 22 feet, and the second story from 14 to 15 feet. The total size of the completed structure was 126 x 121 feet 6 inches.

I have made enlarged plans to a scale of the basement and principal stories on which are shown the arrangement of the walls, the shape and size of the rooms. The next step was to take the report of James Hoben, which the com-

missioners of the District of Columbia, Wm. Thornton and Alex. White, sent in 1799 to the Sixth Congress, then holding its first session in Philadelphia. This report gives the dimensions, in many instances, the shape and character of finish for the different rooms in the building, as well as mentioning the purpose for which they were to be used. The report does not give the stories on which the rooms are placed or the position in which they are located except in three instances. It is only by taking their floor dimensions and heights and locating the rooms where they will fit into the plan that we are able to tell with accuracy the position they occupied in the building.

A room 48 x 86 x 41 feet was provided for the Senate. The dimensions of the old Senate Chamber, or present Supreme Court room, were found to fit these floor dimensions and the height would carry the room through the basement and first story. We all have felt assured that the Senate met in this room, as Thornton marked it on his early plan as the Senate Chamber, but this corroborative testimony fixes the meeting of this branch of Congress in the portion of the building first assigned to it. While Thornton's plan shows only twelve columns, Hoban mentions sixteen. This increase was made doubtless in the preparation of the working drawings. One point has developed in this comparison of plans, documents and reports which I think is unknown at the present time. I have always assumed that the floor of the old Senate was on the principal, or first floor, in other words where the floor of the Supreme Court is to-day. Three points the height of the Chamber, the location and height of the Senate lobby and the exterior steps which are shown as leading up to the Senate floor, which on Thornton's plan indicates a height of about two feet from the ground when taken in connection with the dimensions of rooms as given by Hoban show that the Senate floor was in the basement of the Capitol.

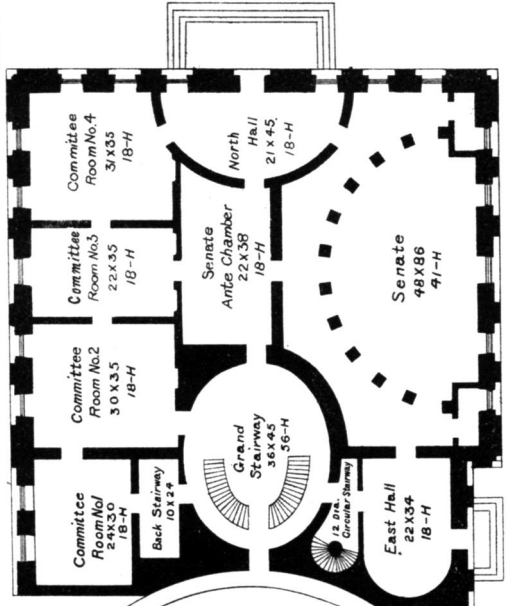
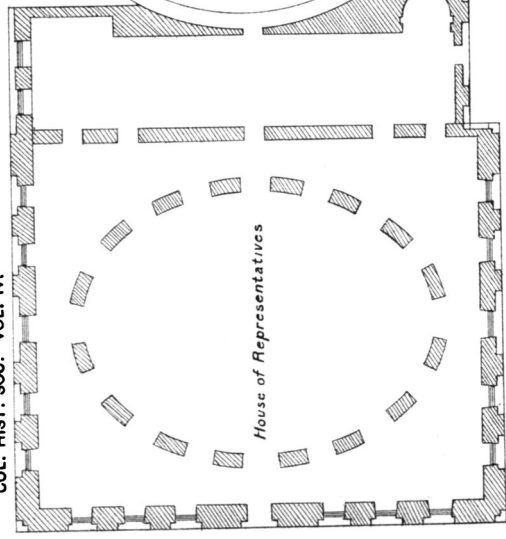


FIG. 1. *Basement Plan*
1800

SOUTH WING ABOVE GROUND.

ROTUNDA PORTION OF FOUNDATION IN PLACE.

SENATE WING COMPLETE.

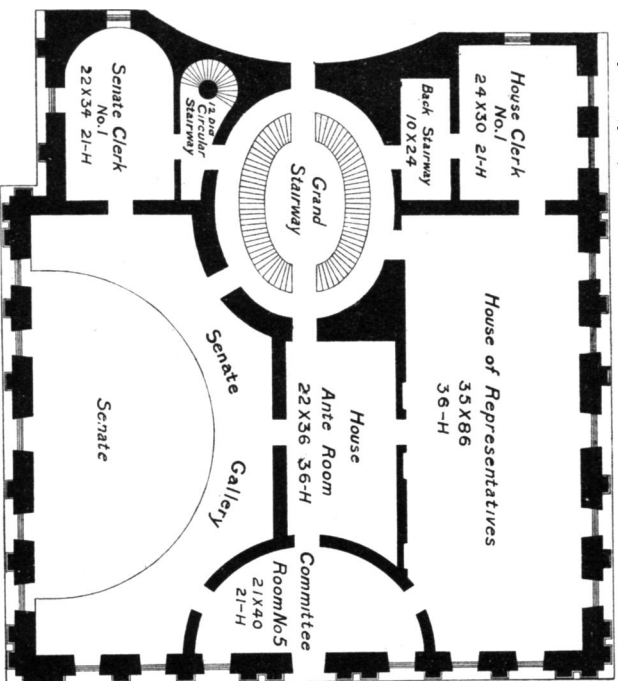


FIG. 2. PRINCIPAL STORY PLAN.

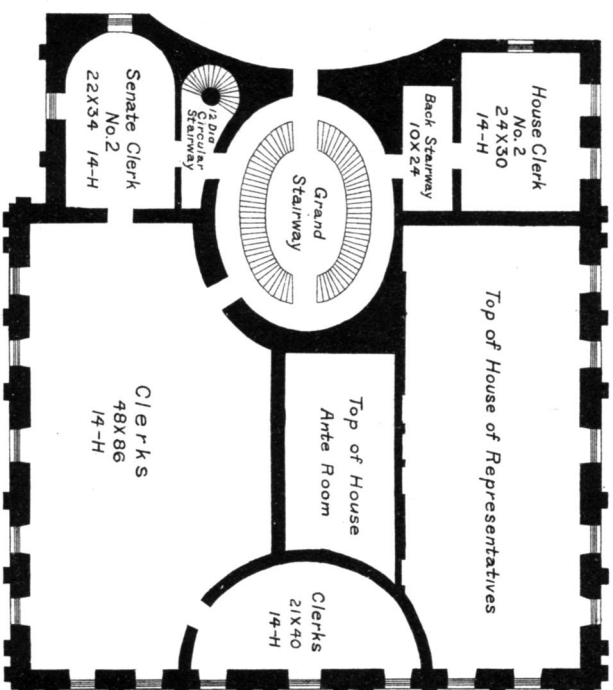


FIG. 3. ATTIC STORY PLAN.

A letter of Jefferson's, which I have recently found furnishes corroborative evidence of this fact. Thos. Jefferson, in referring to the Senate Chamber in a letter to Latrobe July 25, 1808, says, "lay the floors where the gallery floor now is to be the floor of the future Senate Chamber, open it above to the roof to give it elevation enough leaving the present columns uninjured until we see that everything else being done and paid for there remains enough to make these columns of stone."

Two compartments in the basement are easily located, the north hall which Hoban says is semi-elliptical and 21 x 45 feet, 18 feet high, and the east hall 22 x 34 feet, 18 feet high are fixed by the points of the compass, as well as by their floor dimensions and height. The antechamber of the Senate is given as 22 x 38 feet, 18 feet high and the fact is mentioned that the room is lighted from above. We find a room with no windows, just west of the Senate Chamber which fits these dimensions, and being in the most natural position for a lobby, it was undoubtedly the Senate lobby, or antechamber. Taking the other rooms which Hoban states were 18 feet high, and marked "committee rooms" we find the dimensions are similar to the sizes of the rooms Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4.

The halls and stairways on this floor are easily placed when we compare the plans and descriptions. First, the principal stairway as shown on the plan, is in accordance with Hoban's description, elliptical and 36 x 45 x 56 feet in dimensions. The back stairway is 10 x 24 feet. The only space which approximates this dimension, is on the west of the elliptical staircase and this space was afterwards and is to-day used for that purpose, although Thornton does not indicate a stairway on his plan. This made a private entrance for the House of Representatives and their clerks. On the east of the principal staircase Thornton shows a circular one and Hoban says the completed circular stair-

way was 12 feet in diameter. This diameter agrees with the dimensions of plan. In a later report Hoban mentions these stairways as being in the southeast and southwest portions of the building where we find them on Thornton's plans. He also mentions the circular one which leads to the offices of the Senate clerks in the stories above.

As the south wing, the portion of the building intended for the House of Representatives, was only a few feet above ground, it was necessary to locate the House in temporary quarters.

The room prepared for the House was 86 x 35 x 36 feet high with cove ceiling. The only space where such a room could be placed was on the west front of the wing. This space was found on scaling the plan to be exactly 35 feet wide and a few inches over 86 feet long and must according to its height have taken in the first and second stories. This room had a gallery probably on the lines of the gallery used in the same room when it was changed to a library.

As corroborative testimony Congress on December 18, 1801, after the House had moved into the oven as it was called, a temporary structure erected in the south wing, passed a resolution to use the room occupied by the House during the 2d session of the 6th Congress as a library and we have the plan of Latrobe for fitting this room up as a library of Congress.

The House antechamber is mentioned by Hoban as 22 x 38 x 36 feet. A room just this width and length is over the Senate antechamber. The fact that this space was lighted by a skylight, which also lighted the antechamber of the Senate, proves that one was above the other, the lower one being lighted by a well room around which Hoban mentions putting a railing.

The other rooms on the principal floor are easily developed from the description. Committee room No. 5, 21 x 40

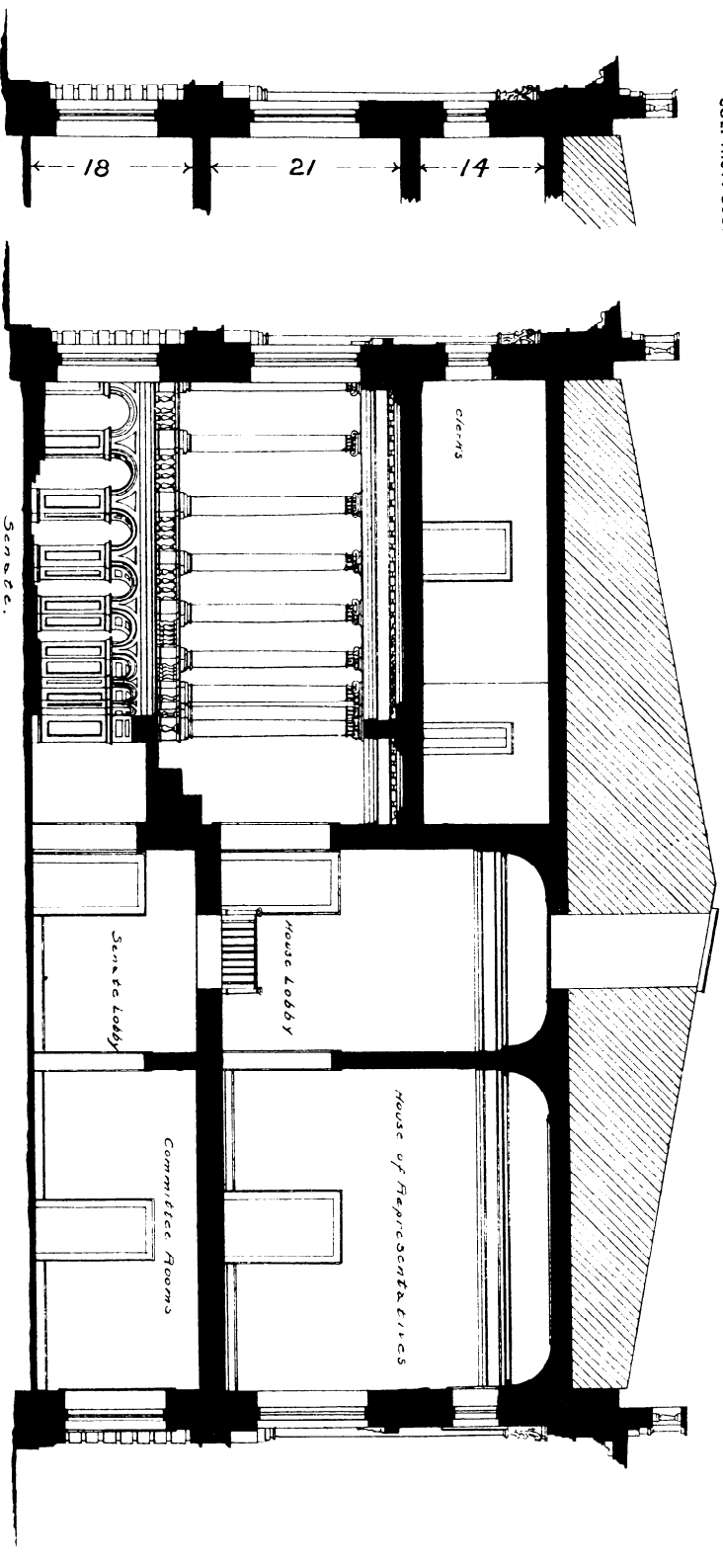


FIG. 4. SECTION SHOWING INTERIOR OF SENATE CHAMBER.

x 21 feet over the north hall, is given as the same width as the hall but a little less in length. As this is the only space which approximates the size given for this committee room, we must assume, and it is the only instance where it has been necessary to make an assumption, that the elliptical shape of this room was squared up by wooden furring to make the wall surfaces more suitable for committee purposes. One of the rooms for the clerk of the Senate 24 x 30 x 21 feet fits in over the east hall, and one of the rooms for the clerk of the House fits in over committee room No. 1. The staircase halls continue through this story and give an entrance to the Senate gallery which is an amphitheatre 110 feet in circumference the exact dimension given by Hoban. On the third floor, the clerks of the Senate and House have rooms over and of the same size as their rooms on the principal floor, except in height which is fourteen feet and a large room for clerk 48 x 86 x 14 feet high which could only be over the Senate chamber.

This was the room which Jefferson ordered removed when the floor of the Senate was raised to the principal floor so as to carry the ceiling of the modified chamber up to the roof line. Another room was provided for clerks on this floor over the committee room No. 5. The above rooms account for all space which the building contained except the cellar.

From the different descriptions I have been able to make a drawing showing the interior of the Senate chamber. It was a room of dignity and refinement, consisting of an arcade encircling the Senate seats on the ground-floor, with paneled piers and molded caps and bases. On this arcade rested the gallery. The front of the gallery was treated as a semi-elliptical, almost semi-circular colonnade of the ancient Ionic columns, sixteen in number surmounted by an appropriate classical entablature.

Nothing is given of the character of the gallery in the

House, as it was at the time a temporary experiment. It was probably not in any way elaborate.

The section shows the heights of the different stories and how the halls for the Senate and House each were two stories high.

The exterior of the building as designed by Thornton was the portion completed in 1800. It was a simple, refined and dignified structure, being a very refined example of Italian Renaissance.

On the exterior, the building showed the north wing completed—three sides of it being built of Aquia Creek sandstone, while the south side had a combination of temporary brick walls and a portion of the foundation for the dome in place; while the south wing was several feet above ground. The perspective shows the condition and appearance of the exterior when it was first occupied by Congress. The House found its quarters cramped and insufficient and ordered a temporary structure to be built in the south wing for their accommodation. Hoban reports December 14, 1801, that this structure was ready for the meeting of the 7th Congress. It was an elliptical brick structure 70 x 94 a little over 18 feet high, with sixteen niches and sixteen arches to form an arcade having a semi-elliptical gallery.

This hall was connected with the Senate wing by a covered way 145 feet long, with two flights of steps probably leading to the House gallery in the oven, as the temporary structure was called.

Since preparing the above paper I have found two letters bearing upon this subject—one by Latrobe in 1802, criticising the fact that the Senate was placed on the ground floor, but commending the beauty of the design, and one from Jefferson in 1805 in reference to raising the floor level of the Senate.

The letter of Latrobe also gives a sketch showing the room occupied by the House where we have located it on the plan

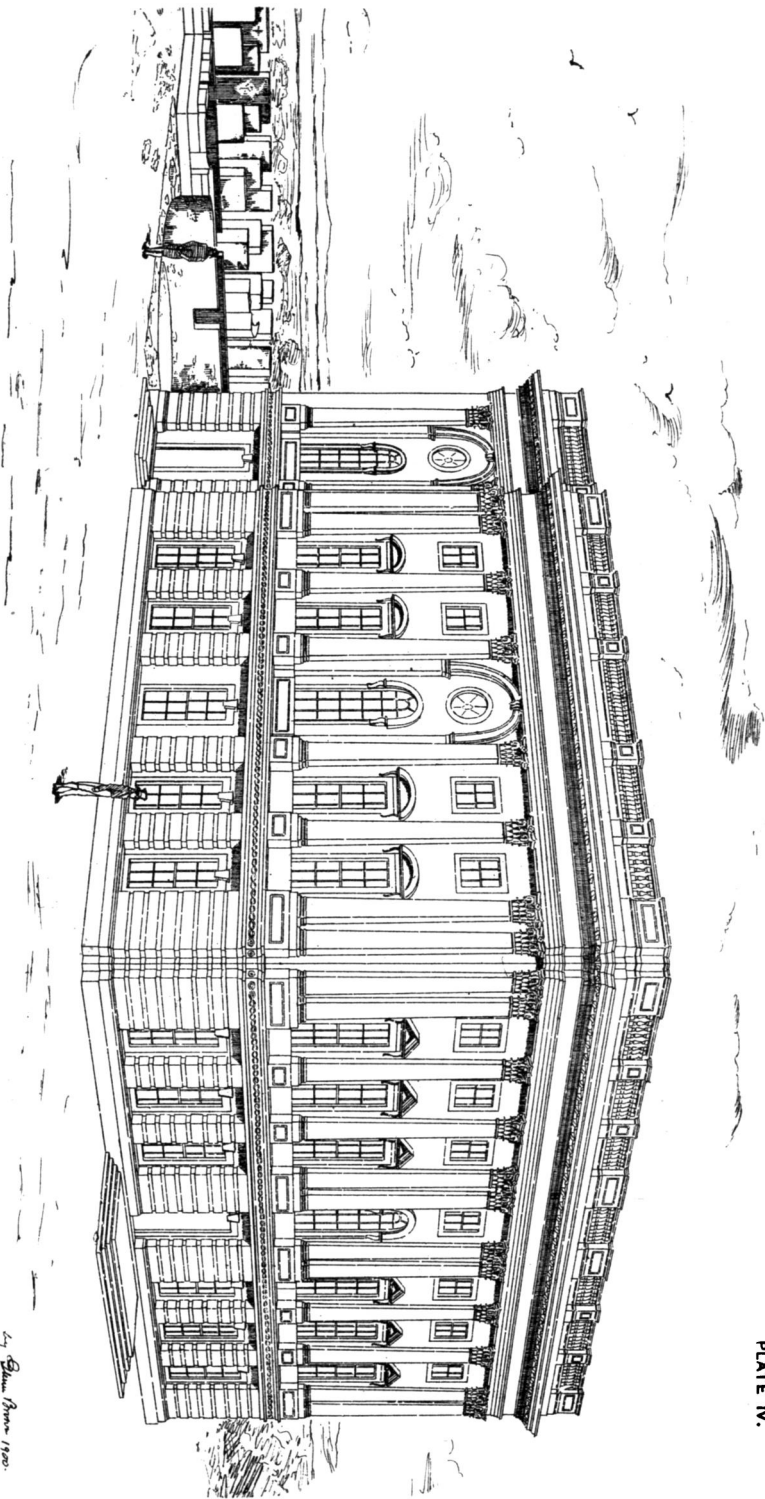


FIG. 5. VIEW OF CAPITOL WHEN FIRST OCCUPIED BY CONGRESS, 1800—THORNTON, ARCHITECT.